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ABSTRACT

A three-step process of description, reduction, and interpretation is employed in this paper in disentangling the complex of relationships involved in oral interpretation. In the description, contributions from various disciplines are synthesized; among the topics discussed are the communication process model usually employed in descriptions of oral interpretation, the difference between cybernetics and oral interpretation as a communicative process, and descriptions of oral interpretation as metonymy (part-to-whole relation) and metaphor (part-to-part/whole-to-whole relation). The definition of oral interpretation as performance of literature is exposed as inadequate, since literature is always already a performance. In the reduction step, the paper describes the multiplicity of messages in structuralist terminology as a paradigmatic/syntagmatic relation, identifies two organizations of possible relation as those of multifinality and equifinality, and redefines oral interpretation as "performing performance." In the third step, that of interpretation, the paper explores the implicit organization of the first two steps, explains how oral interpretation may be considered the paradigm for such theoretical positions as communication theory, phenomenology, and structuralism, and poses several questions of related disciplines. (GT)

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ORAL INTERPRETATION AS PERFORMING PERFORMANCE

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ORAL INTERPRETATION AS PERFORMING PERFORMANCE

Theoretical descriptions of "what happens" in an oral interpretation event often employ such diverse perspectives as aesthetics, communication theory, linguistics, literary criticism, and recently, phenomenology and structuralism.[1] Such borrowings are understandable in the attempt to disentangle the complex of relationships usually termed the "performance of literature." What is interesting about these applications is the suggestion that perhaps the converse proposition is also valid--that oral interpretation contributes a valuable perspective in the approach to other disciplines, i.e., a theoretical grounding. The organization of this paper, therefore, follows that of description, reduction, and interpretation. The contributions from various disciplines are synthesized in the description. A reduction of this description gives rise to a theoretical re-definition of oral interpretation. Finally, an interpretation of the relationship between the reduction and the description explicates and analytically specifies the contributions from related disciplines. This specification in turn suggests a theoretical grounding from which oral interpretation can pose several questions of related disciplines.

The possibility of describing the attributes shared by a number of oral interpretation events is the ability to generate a model. Not surprisingly the predominately employed model is that of a communicative process. A communicative process, according to Umberto Eco, may be defined as "the passage of a signal (not necessarily a sign) from a

source (through a transmitter, along a channel) to a destination."[2] A communicative process, as such, may also describe machine to machine communication. Applications of this mechanistic version of a communication model to oral interpretation emphasize the linear, causal nature of the event.[3] Perhaps the most fundamental problem with this perspective is the isolation of an explicit subject matter as a closed system rather than the identification of relationships or functions in an open system. An example of this explicit subject matter would be the isolation of the interpreter as the source, the literature as a signal, and the audience as the destination. Certainly oral interpretation fulfills this description, but surely there is a great deal more involved.

The difference between cybernetics and oral interpretation as a communicative process is precisely that oral interpretation is human communication. Eco differentiates these two perspectives by noting that "when the destination is a human being . . . we are . . . witnessing a process of signification."[4] A system of signification (a code) is a necessary condition for human communication. As Eco further clarifies:

> When--on the basis of an underlying rule--something actually presented to the perception of the addressee stands for something else, there is signification. In this sense the addressee's actual perception and interpretive behavior are not necessary for the definition of a significant relationship as such: it is enough that the code should foresee an established correspondence between that which 'stands for' and its correlate.[5]

The jargon here may appear tiresome and picayune, but it is only through such judicious and precise terminology that one can avoid a variety of pseudo-problems. One such supposed paradox, often phrased under various guises,[6] is the question of whether literature exists before one reads it. This statement is problematic only with the distinction between a mechanistic and a human communicative process. From a mechanistic perspective (the passage of a signal) literature does not exist until it is read because the information has not been "transmitted" to a destination. From a human communication perspective (a process of signification) literature exists even if not read because the ability of a sender or an addressee to anticipate the "possibility of" therefore presupposes that existence. The degree of performance of text from this perspective may be considered akin to that described by potential energy.

With these distinctions in mind let us re-examine the oral interpretation event. First, throughout the following discussion, the retention of the sender, channel, and addressee labels identifies characteristics and not distinct physical entities. The oral interpreter, for example, may be considered from a part and whole perspective. Holistically, the oral interpreter is sender (composing coded messages), channel (part of the environment), and addressee (receiving and thereby interpreting coded messages), all necessary to the creating of a text (a whole). With the expansion of addressee to include significant others--an audience--the oral interpreter can be viewed as a constituent (a part), the sender, in a system. This relationship, a part standing for a whole, depends upon implied contiguity--basically metonymic.

Additionally, oral interpretation may be examined as the relation between the coherence of parts or of wholes--basically metaphoric. The relationship between parts, for example, may be seen as the asserted similarity between the experience of the sender and the experience of the addressee. Between wholes, this is the degree of similarity between creating of $text_1$ and creating of $text_2$. Thus we see that any oral interpretation event stands in relation to other oral interpretation events, as well as other "readings" of the "same" literature.

In summary, the description of oral interpretation as metonomy (part-to-whole relation) and metaphor (part-to-part/whole-to-whole relation) exposes the difference between literature and performance as a falsely assumed distinction. Literature is always already a performance.[7] Or, variously, literature is always literature-in-performance. Thus we see that literature (or oral interpretation), as performance, is concerned with a multiplicity of messages. Eco notes that "information of the message can be defined as a state of disorder in relation to a successive order; as an ambiguous situation in relation to an ulterior elimination of ambiguity; as a possibility of alternative choices in relation to a system of definitely realized choices."[8]

The synchronic examination of this multiplicity of messages yields a structural definition articulated primarily as the distinction between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships.[9] An aesthetic text, as evidenced in the discussion of metonomy, depends upon a contiguous chain of relations. These relations tend to be distributional, that is, syntagmatic. The metonymic relation of syntagmatic chains describes a system of definitely realized choices. Similarly, the discussion of

metaphor grounds a consideration of those relations which are primarily integrative, that is, paradigmatic. Indeed, each present syntagmatic chain stands in relation to alternative syntagmatic chains through the possibility of metaphoric substitution. Hence in any oral interpretation there are a variety of (to paraphrase Frost) roads not taken, and that makes all the difference.

An oral interpretation text proposes an ambiguous situation and a structure from which to explore that ambiguity. This text may be considered aesthetic in that the multiplicity of messages are contextually significant, i.e., create a consciously experienced value. The addressee is involved in an interpretive effort which may be expressed as the relationship between: 1) a process which begins with a similar ambiguous situation leading to a dissimilar disambiguation (multifinality), and 2) a process leading to a similar disambiguation from dissimilar initial ambiguous situations (equifinality). In oral interpretation, for example, the addressee may be aware of the sender as both friend and literary persona as opposed to recognizing only the friend. Another example is the situation where one states "whenever I see 'Hamlet' I think of Gielgud's performance" or the statement "I can't imagine anyone else performing that poem." Both statements depend upon multifinality. A common example of equifinality would be a groupie's inability to distinguish between Henry Winkler and "The Fonz."

However, in either instance of equifinality or multifinality, the emphasis is not so much upon the ambiguous situation or the structure from which to explore that ambiguity, but the exploring. The description of oral interpretation as aesthetic text is inadequate as it does not

explain the process of creating. The implicit focus of the discussion thus far has centered upon the nature of the event as a state of affairs. Explicitly, our concern was with performance. As the discussion moves to a consideration of the function of oral interpretation as process, the focus shifts to a concern with creating an aesthetic text. The distinction suggested here is parallel to a certain extent with the previously established relations of metaphor/metonomy, paradigmatic/syntagmatic, and finally, performing/performance. Performing (process) specifies the difference of degree variation as synthesis of creating, while performance (state) specifies the difference of kind as analysis of text into messages. Hence, the union of performing and performance constitutes a theory of oral interpretation.

Let us review the discussion to this point. First, the description of oral interpretation as performance of literature was exposed as theoretically questionable in that literature in conscious experience is always already a performance. Therefore, oral interpretation would be defined as "performance of performance." This re-definition is inadequate as it does not describe the distributional relations of performance-of-sender, and performance-of-addressee, as well as the performance-of-message. Second, these distributional relations, considered alone, fail to account for the integrative relations which function synergistically as performing. The final re-definition of oral interpretation as performing performance explains why an aesthetic text is necessarily a creating.

This organization reflects the first two steps of a phenomenological methodology of description, reduction, and interpretation.[10] Each step

may also be subdivided into a similar three-part organization. Each step synergistically entails the previous one. The third step of interpretation will begin with a description of this process as it was employed to help clarify the methodological application. First, in the description step, normal presuppositions about oral interpretation were "bracketed" and oral interpretation was described in terms of communication theory. This description led to a definition of the "event" in linguistic terminology as a reduction to a metaphor/metonomy distinction. Thus, we saw that our bracketed assumption of oral interpretation as performance of literature was inadequate and that a redefinition was necessary which would account for a multiplicity of messages (or relations).

Second, the definition step began with a description of this multiplicity of messages in structuralist terminology as a paradigmatic/syntagmatic relation. Variations through a substitutive process identified two organizations of possible relation as those of multifinality and equifinality. These processes indicate oral interpretation's implicit status as both an open and closed system. Our bracketed assumption of oral interpretation as aesthetic text was revised to account for creating and, therefore, re-defined as performing performance.

Finally, we moved into the third step, that of interpretation, by exploring a description of the implicit organization of the first two steps. Our analysis of the synthetic description and definition of oral interpretation reveals the variety of contributions from other disciplines. Oral interpretation in this instance functions as an exemplar for various theoretical positions. Our discussion, however, suggests

that this proposition is reversible. Oral interpretation may be considered the paradigm for communication theory, phenomenology, structuralism, etc. Before I am accused of imperialism, let me suggest a justification for such a seemingly untenable position.

Oral interpretation articulates the previously described relations (metaphor/metonomy, paradigmatic/syntagmatic, performing/performance) explicitly, whereas in a case of ordinary language usage such relations are often only implicit and may be overlooked. And perhaps even more importantly, oral interpretation articulates this articulation of relation--a double articulation which opens up to a free play of multiple articulation. In other words, by openly acknowledging that oral interpretation (performing performance) is a performance of a performance, the interpreter holds a mirror--as it were--not up to nature but up to an-other mirror creating an infinite regress of performances. The result is an unending multiplicity of playing. And the oral interpeter does not dismay at untangling such a morass, but rejoices and (to paraphrase Roethke) learns by going where he has to go.

Perhaps it is not academically viable, or theoretically feasible, to consider oral interpretation as an all encompassing paradigm. On the other hand, it can not be safely stated that oral interpretation is only a particular instance of creative activity which has little to offer in the way of theory construction. At the very least, on the basis of my present argument, oral interpretation can pose the following questions: 1) can literary criticism methodologically describe and explain the creating of an aesthetic text within a poetics, 2) how does structuralism describe the nature of interpretive-understanding in the performing of

the individual, 3) how does phenomenology explain the conventional function of performance, and 4) what is the value of a communication model which specifies the simultaneity of a mechanistic theory of communication as well as a theory of human communication.

NOTES

[1]For two recent examples, see Elizabeth C. Fine and Jean Haskell Speer, "A New Look at Performance," Communication Monographs, 44, No. 4 (1977), 374-389; or Studies in Interpretation, ed. Esther M. Doyle and Virginia Hastings Floyd, I (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi N.V., 1972), and II (1977).

[2]Umberto Eco, A Theory of Semiotics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 8.

[3]Eric E. Peterson, The Communication Model Perspective of Oral Interpretation (ERIC CS 501799).

[4]Eco, p. 8.

[5]Eco, p. 8-9.

[6]Such as: when does the encounter of a poem begin; are literary personas "real" or "virtual;" what is the difference between a real or implied author.

[7]Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 162.

[8]Eco, p. 140-141.

[9]For a more complete explication of a structuralist approach see Mary Frances HopKins, "Structuralism: Its Implications for the Performance of Prose Fiction," Communication Monographs, 44, No. 2 (1977), 93-105.

[10]This methodological application is similar to the one proposed by Richard L. Lanigan, "The Phenomenology of Human Communication," Philosophy Today (Forthcoming).